

Daniel Ellsberg

Age

April 10, 1982

[Additional comments, May 31, 1991, in brackets]

Reflections on Rage, Scapegoating, Massacre and Crises

In "Overcoming Procrastination," by Albert Ellis and Willian J. Knaus (NAL, NY. 1977) the authors question whether abreaction, "living out feelings from your past which you presumably have held in or repressed over the years," is worthwhile. They describe results of this, in Freud's experience and others, as questionable (Gestalt, Reichian and primal therapy).

"Does this do more than temporary good?" [To "blow off steam"]. Doesn't it often do more harm than good, in that such feelings as anger get practiced and reinforced by expression? For, as you tell someone off, angrily push him away, or savagely beat a pillow that you imagine represents his head, don't you reinforce the belief with which you make yourself angry--"He shouldn't have done that to me, that lousy son-of-a-gun! I hope he drops dead!" [May 31, 1991: Thich Nhat Hanh made this point in almost the same words in a lecture on Mt. Madonna, May, 1991: better, he suggested, to work off energy by jogging than to rehearse violence by beating a pillow.]

"RET [rational-emotive therapy] tends to resolve this dilemma by encouraging people to express their appropriate rather than their inappropriate feelings. Thus, if you feel displeased about someone's behavior and you wish to express that feeling to this person, you assert yourself and constructively try to get him or her to change the behavior..

"Anger or rage, however, almost always amounts to an inappropriate feeling, in that it follows from your demanding, not merely wanting, another to stop behaving in an obnoxious manner, and from you denigrating this person, in toto, rather than his or her acts. Consequently, in expressing anger you act aggressively rather than assertively,..." (116-117).

The distinctions and suggestions expressed above are like Barbara Deming's, in her essay "On Anger." And like Deming and Gandhi, Ellis emphasizes the distinction between a person's self or being and her actions, behavior; and suggests that one should refrain from judging the former, especially negatively, and especially hating the person, or condemning, rejecting, scorning, disregarding, or violently hurting, killing or insulting, humiliating her: while judging and even hating some of her acts, and acting nonviolently (in assertion of one's own beliefs and values) to block those actions or their effects, even at the cost

of one's own suffering.

Ellis and Knaus consistently extend this prescription -- judge/condemn/hate the action, not the person (who is neither bad in all respects nor all the time, nor unchangeable, nor less than human)--to oneself. That is, one should not judge or condemn one's own self--as if, in toto, or for all time, and hyperbolically, without understanding or compassion--for some failing or even crime, rather than condemning the action itself.

Jeffrey Masson, by contrast, insists on the validity and importance of judging and condemning the person, by their acts. His axiom is, Good people do not commit evil, wrongful, harmful acts; people who do such things are bad people, evil. Why does this seem so important to him?

Why is he so eager to condemn? Is it: to deny, or project? He does tend also to insist: "You and me, we're not like that! We wouldn't do that!"

He says this in the guise not of congratulating us but of making the point that these other people are different, bad and evil, sadistic, in an identifiable way that distinguishes them from us. (My general hypothesis about JMM is that he is ashamed of his his own complicity in his abuse by his parents, and his dependence on them, his continued passivity--acceptance of their behavior, compliance with their demands, silence to them about his complaints--and conceals this behavior from himself, along with his anger and shame about it, becoming very angry at any suggestion that any victim in any contributes to her (he identifies, especially, with female victims) oppression or is in any way, to the slightest degree, responsible (though not blameworthy) for it.

He denounces that as "blaming the victim." (He hates the Arendt theses: both the blaming of Jewish passivity and the description of Eichmann as banal, not especially evil or really, special in any way).

But this interpretation does not fully answer the questions about him above. [May 31, 1991: The above points on Masson must have been added sometime after 1982, since I had not met Jeffrey then.]

The authors do not ever, in their discussion, address another aspect of the common inappropriateness of strong anger or rage, or of expressing it: that it is commonly (always? almost always?) displaced from someone else, in the past or present. That is, the anger that is felt consciously, or that is expressed when anger is expressed (i.e., less often than it is felt) is "really" evoked by displacement from or association with someone else in a different situation. If there is an association with the past or other person or situation, a similarity in the situation, that triggering

element or similarity is usually unconscious, too, so that the "reason" for the anger, what it is that makes you angry (as well as "who it is") is misconstrued and misexpressed.

I don't believe Deming makes this point, either. Or perhaps, Gandhi.

This morning I woke up with the thought: Certain emotions--powerful anger, rage, hatred (desire to hurt or destroy)--are never or almost never consciously felt or expressed "appropriately": i.e., addressed to the persons or situations that really evoke such strong emotion (as distinct from some more, or less, arbitrary representative of them in the present context, a likeness or scapegoat), and with an accurate understanding of why the emotion is felt, i.e., what it is in the person, relation, behavior or situation that predictably evokes the reaction.

In other words, when the anger is felt, or one is tempted to express it, it would virtually always be appropriate to ask: Who am I (they) really angry at, and why? The answer does not always or exclusively lie in the past; even in the present, the anger is displaced. (The immediate, conscious target is a stand-in for someone else in the immediate present or past, who in turn evokes or stands-in for someone in the more distant past).

Why the frequency or universality of this displacement, or rather, these multiple displacements? Why the commonness of denial, repression, concealment from oneself?

A hypothesis is that such intense emotions first arise in infancy (as distinct from childhood: this draws on Melanie Klein). They are not only "pre-Oedipal," they are pre-verbal, pre-locomotive. They arise when the infant cannot verbalize either the emotion or the situation giving rise to it. The emotion can be, and is expressed non-verbally, by crying, facial expression, contortion... This may lead to comforting; even if it does not, the emotion is expressed anyway.

Here there is a problem with my explanation: for the infants do not, at this stage, repress or displace their rage, or fail to express it, even though the reasons for doing so will never be so strong again: at this stage, prior to their ability even to walk or feed themselves, they are both totally vulnerable to this infinitely stronger person, and totally dependent on her and her goodwill. Both of these are reasons not to risk displeasing her by expressing these strong complaints to her directly. Yet the baby does anyway, even when the immediate results are not pleasing.

My hypothesis has to be, I guess, that this pattern changes as the child grows somewhat older. At some point it learns that it is too dangerous--in terms of immediate punishment, or general loss of affection and care-taking--to express to these powerful persons,

the parents, the emotions that they, peculiarly, continue to evoke. The same applies to certain feelings about siblings, where again the punishment comes from the parents.

And since it is dangerous to express these feelings, it is dangerous even to be conscious of them, to be tempted to express them; better to deny and repress them, or learn to displace their targets, either to oneself or other scapegoats.

It is, above all, the parents (initially, the mother) , who evoke these strong emotions: in other words, the initial targets of such emotions are not only powerful, they are all-powerful, awesomely potent, both in fantasy and in reality, to a degree that is never so true again. This is a reality, both in terms of the infant's needs and the relative disparity in destructive power, the unlimited ability to hurt. And this reality is further magnified, if that is possible, by the infant's fantasy.

Thus the practical reasons for denying, repressing and displacing these feelings are, at the very beginning, as strong or stronger than they ever will be again. And when these reasons are, at some early stage, translated into corresponding behavior of denying, repressing, displacing, transforming, a powerful habit is formed: these feelings are to be displaced, they are not to be expressed immediately, directly, toward the person or situation triggering them.

At the least, a strong, habitual readiness to displace or store, quickly and unconsciously, is formed. And this is reinforced in later childhood and adult life by the fact that it remains practically useful, survival-oriented and success-oriented, because so often (though not always) the initial situation is reproduced. The person who evokes the powerful emotion, by frustrating, attacking or humiliating oneself, is powerful--often, far more powerful than oneself--both in ability to hurt and ability to help, and it is therefore dangerous, just as in early years, to express or even consciously feel (with the risk of betraying) these emotions.

Yet the feelings exist, and search for an outlet; again, rather than risk a tacit expression of them toward their real object (who may not only be harmed and angered by this, damaging the relationship, but may see through this inadvertent behavior to its "meaning") it is safer to act on the habit of displacing the emotion, both consciously and in action.

Expressing anger or hatred at someone who is, in effect, a scapegoat, not only relieves the tension of the emotion but helps conceal its original, "true" target, for greater safety. This is all the more effective because others rarely "see through" it. I conjecture that the pattern of behavior is both so ubiquitous and so universally denied that other people--not wanting to see it in

themselves--do not regularly hypothesize it or perceive it in others.

Since the objective is to feel and express the rage relatively safely, the immediate target should be someone who--while not necessarily totally harmless or unthreatening--is less dangerous, in terms of ability to harm or to withhold a relationship or value--than the one initially evoking the emotion.

When it comes, especially, to physical violence, an "irony" results: the victim of the violence is not only weaker, in fact, extremely weak--that follows from simple prudence--but "innocent," having in fact done little or nothing to provoke the response in reality (though the perpetrator's conscious fantasy is different).

How can this satisfy one's desire for dignity, for vindication? After all, one is then acting as badly as the aggressor, acting "just like him." Exactly! One is identifying with the (power and majesty of, the parent-like nature, the arbitrariness and lack of necessary restraint of) the aggressor. If one cannot, for reasons of danger (and deeply ingrained and basically prudent habit) reverse roles with the actual aggressor--satisfying as it is to do so in fantasy--one can do so in reality with a stand-in: who stands in not only for the "aggressor" but for the weak, needy, passive, infantile, vulnerable aspects of self that made one a target of the aggression, that invited it, and that "deserve to be punished," projected outward, denied as part of oneself, extirpated: from oneself, from the face of the earth...

This is part of the meaning, I have long hypothesized, of traditional scapegoats like the Jews, Armenians, women and children, in the eyes of their brutalizers.

I have long noted the pattern: Where one finds massacre, one finds massacre above all of the innocent (this could be almost be seen as definitional of massacre) and also, of the weak, the inoffensive, especially women and children, along with aged and sick (note the treatment by police of Ron Kovic, the paraplegic protestor).

Wild, unlimited, indiscriminate, out of control destructive rage is manifested commonly (except for certain frenzies on the battlefield, against actual combatants) on weak and innocent scapegoats. I am suggesting that this is not merely prudent (or cowardly) but that the very weakness, dependency and unthreatening character is what evokes the rageful behavior against this particular target, representing unconsciously the supposed aspects of the attacker's self that led to his own victimisation and humiliation, aspects of himself which he (virtually always a man) is ashamed and would like both to deny and destroy.

Some common characteristics of the situation are (1) an

immediate humiliation or defeat or humiliating injury, evoking a rage and desire for vindication of "honor" and "dignity" (restoration of disastrously damaged self-esteem) by "evening the score, restoring the balance, paying back" by acting as powerfully and destructively as the aggressor, acting the superior, like one's oppressor, cancelling the impression and reality of one's own relative weakness, incompetence, lower status. Yet (2) where the actual aggressor is inaccessible or too strong or invulnerable or too dangerous to attack.

The pattern I note is that the substitute for this work of restoring one's pride and image and working off the painful emotions is not a close likeness of the aggressor--somewhat more accessible, or less strong and dangerous, but still a fit match--but rather a victim that is very much weaker, relative to oneself, than one was in relation to one's oppressor. (Or else, the inequality is great in both cases: not less in the case of the scapegoat).

Thus, the British campaign of bombing German cities begins immediately after the fall of Singapore. The Final Solution commences after the Germans are halted in Russia (though it may have been planned earlier: the degree of prior planning is just now subject to major controversy, sparked by Arno Mayer's assertion of the thesis suggested here). In general, victims of genocide are attacked just after or in the context of humiliation or failure involving the attackers: see Kuper's analyses. Later, in Japan and in Vietnam, strategic bombing is used more instrumentally, having become available as a wartime tactic.

My old hypothesis on massacre: It is humanly possible, available, both to leaders and followers, in part because: a) the original "aggressor" with respect to each human (this follows Melanie Klein) is a woman, a mother; other babies--siblings--also evoked powerful rage and hatred; and in torturing or killing women and children, one (male) is also attacking and denying/projecting the weak, womanly and babyish aspects of oneself that made one vulnerable and ashamed (and later, both at the "oedipal stage" and at puberty and adolescence and later) threatened one's acceptance by male colleagues and powerful men).

[May 31, 1991: But this does not explain why massacres, genocides and torture are almost exclusively ordered and performed by males. Partly this simply follows directly from the position of males in (male-dominated) society, in the army, police and leadership, though this does not explain mob or individual behavior. Moreover, one could ask whether the prevalence of these phenomena has something to do with the domination by males in "civilized" society: obviously males in these societies (and probably in "primitive" society as well) have a greater acceptance of violence in general, and a greater preoccupation with power.

But is there not also a greater tendency among males for actual or threatened humiliation to lead to violent response, and a greater acceptance of violent risk-taking: the risk of killing, and the risk of dying in the course of pursuing violence? Why should this be? If women (and children: siblings) are the original aggressors, threats, dominators for all infants, female as well as male--which is the thesis not only of Klein but of Dinnerstein and others--why are women and children the later targets of violent aggression almost exclusively by males? (Dinnerstein does not address or answer this).

A hypothesis: Male infants, unlike females, find their sense of gender-identity associated with a sense of difference from the all-powerful, awesome Mother, where girls discover this aspect of their core-identity in "sameness, oneness." This would suggest that girls and women might find much more "natural, fundamental, familiar" a feeling of closeness, identity, inclusion in social relations, while boys and men, relatively speaking, would find themselves more comfortable than females with a perception of difference, separateness. Moreover, for boys, the intense ambivalence evoked (according to Dinnerstein and Klein) in all infants by the mother would, for the boys more than for the girls, be associated with a being who was (in gender terms) different.

I have never seen it suggested, but might it be true that projection as a defense is more available to or more associated with males than females? The notion above would suggest a greater tendency of males to associate negative traits or behavior or feelings--like, the negative part of the ambivalent feelings evoked at various times by the mother--with others who are different, not like the self.

If they were unconsciously to project various undesired self-traits onto others--whether because of a greater tendency to project, or not--or to displace angry, negative feelings from one target to another less dangerous, the projection or displacement might more often be onto others who were different: foreigners, "strangers," women. (Women would have incentive to do this, too, of course: but by these hypotheses, somewhat less: and, for perhaps quite different reasons, less violently.)]

Another issue: Shame and guilt may be equally commonly "inappropriate" in "realistic, adult" terms, not so much in being displaced from something else--though this may often also be true--as in being "evoked by the wrong things" in the first place. That is, I (and Patricia) observe that people rarely seem to feel shame, or guilt, about what they "should," in terms of their actual, adult, especially organizational behavior as leaders or followers--massive destruction for wanton, egotistical motives, rape, torture, murder, oppression, ecocide--but, more likely, for insufficient obedience or loyalty to vicious leaders, incompetence in carrying out immoral commands, or above all, for masturbation

and its accompanying fantasies.

This seems so universal as to raise a real question whether these emotions are, in a deep and long-run sense, socially useful: whether they can be redirected (as, say, the Berrigans or Brian Willson hope to do) toward the enactment of genuine social evil in the interests of motivating urgently needed change, atonement, redemption.

What forces in the self, and in society, will manipulate feelings of guilt and shame more effectively, to what ends? (Compare the question of the uses of patriotism, nationalism, or the instinct of revenge. Or more effectively use violence, censorship? Who will suffer more or benefit more, from "freeing" society of restraints on censorship or on vigilante behavior, from encouraging violent "direct action"? I have always believed, in these cases, that the Left had more to lose than to gain from such "freedoms").

Are the Buddhists right, then, in eschewing concepts of sin, guilt, shame? (As do, on the whole, Ellis and Knaus). A middle position, as Ellis and Knaus suggest, is to relate these only to acts, not to "personhood," overall personality or character, and to look particularly at "social, organizational" acts, much more than private, personal relationships.

[May 31, 1991: Indeed, I find it hard to believe that individual and social efforts to bring about social change can dispense with the notion of individual accountability and thus potential or implied blame, a basis for guilt or shame. But the acts that need judging are above all precisely those done in an institutional setting, where individuals either as officials or followers are deploying the resources and power to harm of large organizations.]

Reckless gambles and vast massacres are available to national leaders as means of escaping short-run prospects of their personal (rationalized as "national") humiliation or defeat or reduction of power. The relevant feeling is desperation. (Is this absolutely necessary? Perhaps. Note the testimony in Barrett's article on LBJ on his anguish in the spring of 1965; supported by Goodwin's testimony on his actual paranoia, which may have been as much a result of his situation as a cause of his decisions).

[May 31, 1991: In sharp crises, one also often finds a leader's feelings of rage and desire for revenge, precisely because of having been thrust, in a humiliating manner, into the desperate situation.

This was the "crisis pattern"--which I further specified and labelled as the "Fait Malaccompli"--my research in 1964 revealed, from my studies of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Suez, the Skybolt

crisis, and the U-2 crisis. (Some aspects of it, though definitely not others, emerged in the secret decisionmaking on Vietnam that fall and the next year, and again later under Nixon). [Note May 31, 1991: the full, precise Fait Malaccompli crisis pattern was reproduced in the response of George Bush to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.]

In these international crises the element of scapegoating seems much less important (though the potential victims of an ensuing conflict would be, of course, almost entirely innocent scapegoats). In the leader's own mind, the target of his rage and threatened violence is precisely the person who humiliated him and threatened him with political failure. But the disproportionate level of risk and violence evoked does have the "mysterious," otherwise inexplicable quality--above all from the perspective of inside information on the actual perception of stakes and risks--that calls for explanation in terms of some such notions as those above.]

What the Pentagon Papers revealed was the shallowness (and puzzling incompleteness) of the reasoning and argument, the decision-making; the lack of revealed concern for human costs, either Vietnamese or American; the lack, anywhere in the comprehensive account, of what seemed remotely adequate motivation for the risks and actual costs.

The same phenomenon appears in a realistic, detailed account (secret at the time) of decision-making surrounding the onset and continuation of Allied strategic bombing in World War II. Likewise for the atomic bombing, which, in reality, was simply part of the same process.

Likewise for the onset, and continuation, and tactics throughout, of World I.

And for Stalin's purges. Pol Pot's genocide.

All of these have a puzzling, mysterious quality to them, of being inadequately motivated, explained: of simply not conforming to our general understanding even of human folly and brutality. The same remains true, of course, of the Holocaust: especially in view of the realistic record of it (which reveals that Hitler's own fantasies, which give some adequate explanation for his own orders, were simply not that widely shared among Nazi leadership).

It is not simply a matter of destructiveness or great risk. Hitler's aggression in Europe and Russia, by contrast (like Japanese aggression in Southeast Asia) has a quasi-rational, understandable feel to it: great risk for great gain, even though the willingness of followers to undertake such risks is somewhat mysterious.

Likewise, Stalin's vast brutality in the collectivisation--as distinct from the later purges--has some brutal logic, though the costs in the end vastly and irreparably outweighed the gains measured in state control of agricultural output. (The strategic bombing has the appearance of this logic, too, till looked at closely. Perhaps the same reservation would be true of the collectivisation if we really saw the documents of the actual discussions, predictions, arguments, doubts, reported results...).

But these others remain mysterious. The foreseeable risks or costs seem vastly disproportionate to any possible gains. And that is true of Vietnam, in the light of the Pentagon Papers: and still more, with the research of Berman and Barrett on the actual advice presented to LBJ, by Clark Clifford and others. [May 31, 1991: Clark Clifford's memoirs, just published, confirm the impression of the above research.]

CRISES -

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